

# Comedy and Politics

## Spring 2025

MWF 9:00 am - 12:00 pm, Huntley 323

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Office Hours: TR 03:30pm-06:30pm

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the intersection of politics and humor, analyzing how comedic expressions—across film, stand-up, memes, cartoons, and satire—reflect, challenge, and reshape political realities. Drawing on foundational political science concepts such as authoritarianism, populism, political violence, corruption, political communication, and civic culture, students will examine how humor simultaneously mirrors and critiques political systems, leaders, and ideologies.

Through a combination of theoretical readings and analysis of comedic content, the course investigates humor as a means of political learning, mobilization, resistance, and democratic engagement. It also considers humor's potential to reinforce exclusion and inequality. Students will critically evaluate the pedagogical, political, and social dimensions of humor across diverse national and cultural contexts.

### COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. **Evaluate the pedagogical and mobilizing power of humor**, recognizing the conditions under which humor can educate, resist, or trivialize political issues.
2. **Develop arguments about the political role of humor** across different cultural and institutional settings, including comparisons between democratic and authoritarian regimes.
3. **Analyze humoristic content critically**, evaluating its political meaning, emotional impact, and potential to either reinforce or challenge political structures.
4. **Critically reflect on the ethical and political limits of humor** in contemporary societies characterized by polarization, digitalization, and algorithmic fragmentation.

### COURSE CORE VALUES

1. No memorization
2. Comparative-based and non-Eurocentric contents.

### 3. Collaborative learning.

## COURSE FORMAT

This course will be held **in person**. Recordings will not be uploaded to Canvas unless W&L decides to switch to an online format due to public health concerns. Students should attend all the sessions, which are mostly discussion sessions, and take notes as needed for their further assignments.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- **Attendance** is non mandatory. **As an adult**, I expect you to manage your own class duties. However, please note that class participation is graded each session, and some class content will be included in evaluations. **It is entirely your responsibility if you receive low grades due to absences.**
- ***Speak up!*** Ask the second you have a question or a comment. Others may have the same concerns you do.
- ***No cell phone use, email checking, or procrastination is allowed during class.*** Activities such as chatting, texting, playing online games, or reading unrelated material show a lack of respect for Prof F and for the class as a whole. Please be respectful, and if you find the class to be unengaging or believe it could be improved, you are welcome to share your feedback during the three (anonymous) feedback sessions scheduled throughout the semester.

## COURSE EVALUATION AND ACTIVITIES

Weight		Grading policy			
Canvas posts	20%	Excellent	A: 94-100	A- : 90-93	
In-class short presentations	20%	Good	B+ : 87-89	B : 84-86	B- : 80-83
In-class activities	20%		C+ : 77-79	C : 74-76;	C- : 70-73
Final project	40%	Poor	D+ : 67-69	D : 64-66;	D- : 61-63
Total	100%	Fail	F : 60 and >		

### 1. Canvas posts (20%)

Each class, students are required to find a humoristic piece related to the specific topic of the session and provide a brief analysis of it, using the general parameters provided at the beginning of the semester and the specific parameters posted by Prof. F for each assignment.

- Students are encouraged to post in up to 10 sessions during the semester but are **allowed to skip up to four posts without penalty.**

- Analyses must be uploaded in **PowerPoint format**.
2. In-class short presentations (20%)  
Using the slides posted on Canvas, students are required to give a short presentation in class sharing their analysis of the humoristic piece they selected.
    - Students are expected to contribute actively throughout the semester.
    - A **minimum of two in-class presentations** in the next twelve weeks is required.
  3. In-class activities (20%)  
During the semester, there will be group dynamics, reading discussions, and brainstorming activities. Students are expected to participate actively in these activities and demonstrate their engagement and commitment to the class.
  4. Final project (40%)  
Students must choose one of the following options for their final project:
    - Create an original piece of political humor (e.g., a political cartoon or a short stand-up routine).
    - Write an analysis of a film with political content, discussing how it can be used to understand a political science concept.
    - Select a political figure (Governor, Member of Congress, or Foreign Authority) who frequently uses humor, and analyze their use of humor in political communication.

**Important:**

Regardless of the format chosen, students must provide a written analysis addressing:

- The humoristic techniques used.
- The connection between the humor and broader political science topics.

**To ensure progress and provide feedback throughout the semester, students are required to submit the following (The due date of each stage is in the last page)**

Stage	Description	Weight
Project Proposal	A one-page description of the project idea.	5% of the final grade
Memo #1	A two-page progress report.	5% of the final grade
Memo #2	A three-page expanded progress report.	5% of the final grade
Final Project	A complete written analysis (7 to 10 pages maximum).	25% of the final grade

**In total, these components will account for 40% of the final course grade.**

## DISABILITY ACCOMODATIONS

The University makes reasonable academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. All accommodations must be approved through the Office of the Dean of the

College. Students requesting accommodations for this course should present an official accommodation letter within the first two weeks of the term and schedule a meeting outside of class time to discuss accommodations. It is the student's responsibility to present this paperwork in a timely fashion and to follow up about accommodation arrangements.

## DIVERSITY STATEMENT

The University affirms that diverse perspectives and backgrounds enhance our community. We are committed to the recruitment, enrichment, and retention of students, faculty, and staff who embody many experiences, cultures, points of view, interests, and identities. As engaged citizens in a global and diverse society, we seek to advance a positive learning and working environment for all through open and substantive dialogue. Please read the [Politics Department Statement on Diversity and Inclusion](#).

### Policy on Prohibited Discrimination

The University prohibits and this policy addresses discrimination, including harassment, on the basis of race, color, religion, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, veteran's status, and genetic information in its educational programs and activities and with regard to employment. Additionally, the University prohibits retaliation against any individual who brings a good faith complaint under this policy or is involved in the complaint process. Students, faculty, and staff found to have violated this policy will be disciplined appropriately, up to and including termination from employment or dismissal from the University.

### Sexual Discrimination & Misconduct Policy

The University prohibits all forms of sexual misconduct-which includes sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual intercourse, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual exploitation, domestic and dating violence, and stalking-and retaliation. This policy provides guidance to assist those who have experienced or been affected by sexual misconduct, whether as a complainant, a respondent, or a third party. It includes detailed information about what conduct is prohibited, confidential and reporting resources, and resolution procedures.

## CLASS MATERIALS

We will not be using a textbook or similar resource. Instead, the primary material for the class will consist of four films, one for each week, which will be provided by Prof. F.

Prof. F will upload all required readings to Canvas prior to the start of the semester.

## CLASS SCHEDULE

Date	Topic	Political Science Concepts	Assigned Reading (mandatory or recommended, TBA)	Assignment
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>				
April 28	Class Introduction + Theories of Humor			
April 30	Types of Humor, Humor Strategies, and Their Use in Politics	Rational choice in politics	Edelman, M. (1988). Chapter 7: <i>The Political Spectacle as Tactic and as Mystification</i> . In <i>Constructing the Political Spectacle</i> (pp. 104–122). University of Chicago Press.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read the assigned reading</li> <li>• Post about your favorite humor piece and how it is connected to the theories of humor? (On Canvas)</li> </ul>
<b>BLOCK 1: COMEDY AS A TOOL FOR LEARNING POLITICS</b>				
May 2	Comedy to learn about Authoritarianism	Characteristics of authoritarian regimes	Linz, J. J. (1975). <i>Characteristics of Authoritarian Regimes</i> . In <i>Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes</i> (Chapter 3, pp. 159–176). Lynne Rienner Publishers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read the assigned reading</li> <li>• Bring a comedy piece (cartoon, short stand-up, meme) illustrating a characteristic of authoritarianism (On Canvas).</li> <li>• Send your Project Proposal (May 4 on Canvas)</li> </ul>
May 5	Comedy to learn about Populism	Definition and characteristics of populism	Mudde, C. and Rovira, C (2017). <i>What Is Populism? and Who Are the People?</i> In <i>Populism: A Very Short Introduction</i> (Chapters 1, pp. 1–20). Oxford University Press.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read the assigned reading</li> <li>• Bring a comedy piece (cartoon, short stand-up, meme) illustrating a characteristic of populism (On Canvas).</li> </ul>
May 7	Comedy to learn about Political Violence	Motivations for terrorism	Crenshaw, M. (1981). <i>The Causes of Terrorism</i> . <i>Comparative Politics</i> , 13(4), 379–399.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read the assigned reading</li> <li>• Bring a comedy piece (cartoon, short stand-up, meme) illustrating a characteristic of political violence (On Canvas).</li> </ul>

Date	Topic	Political Science Concepts	Assigned Reading (mandatory or recommended, TBA)	Assignment
May 9	Comedy to learn about Corruption	Types of political corruption	Rose-Ackerman, S., & Palifka, B. J. (2016). <i>Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform</i> (Chapter 2). Cambridge University Press.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read the assigned reading</li> <li>Bring a comedy piece (cartoon, short stand-up, meme) illustrating a characteristic of political corruption (On Canvas)</li> </ul>
<b>BLOCK 2: COMEDY AS A TOOL FOR POLITICAL ACTION</b>				
May 12	Comedy and Politicians I	Political regimes; elite and partisan polarization	Riker, W. H. (1986). <i>The Nature of Political Manipulation and The Strategy of Rhetoric: Lincoln at Freeport</i> . In <i>The Art of Political Manipulation</i> (Chapters 1–2, pp. 1–28). Yale University Press.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read the assigned reading</li> <li>Bring an example of humor by Trump and by traditional Republicans (Bush Sr., Reagan, McCain, Romney); compare similarities and differences (On Canvas)</li> <li>Send your Project Memo #1 (May 13 on Canvas)</li> </ul>
May 14	Comedy and Politicians II	Political communication and candidate strategy's effectiveness	Baumgartner, J. C., & Morris, J. S. (2008). <i>The Daily Show Effect</i> . In <i>Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age</i> (Chapter 3, pp. 37–58). Routledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read the assigned reading</li> <li>Research and gather three facts each about Pete Buttigieg, Gavin Newsom, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, JD Vance, Marco Rubio (On Canvas)</li> </ul>
May 16	Case Studies: Politicians or clowns?	New political actors; democratic backsliding; weakening of party systems	Linz, J. J. (1978). <i>Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration</i> . In J. J. Linz & A. Stepan (Eds.), <i>The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes</i> (pp. 3–38). Johns Hopkins University Press.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read the assigned reading</li> </ul>

Date	Topic	Political Science Concepts	Assigned Reading (mandatory or recommended, TBA)	Assignment
May 19	Comedy and Social Actors	Resource mobilization; contentious politics	Tarrow, S. (1994). <i>Performing Contentious Politics. In Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics</i> (Chapter 4, pp. 85–110). Cambridge University Press.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read the assigned reading</li> <li>• Bring a humor piece confronting classism, misogyny, racism (On Canvas)</li> <li>• Send your Project Memo #2 (May 20 on Canvas)</li> </ul>
<b>BLOCK 3: ETHICAL AND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES OF POLITICAL COMEDY</b>				
May 21	The Limits of Comedy	State capacity; interest groups' power	Migdal, J. S. (1988). <i>Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities</i> (pp. 15–41). Princeton University Press.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read the assigned reading</li> <li>• Bring a humor piece with controversial humor (On Canvas)</li> </ul>
May 23	Cross-Cultural Political Comedy	Political culture; civic culture	Almond, G. A., & Powell, G. B. (1966). <i>Political Culture and Political Development</i> . In <i>Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach</i> (Chapter 3, pp. 34–57). Little, Brown and Company.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read the assigned reading</li> <li>• Bring humor examples from other countries. Are they funny for you? (On Canvas)</li> </ul>

**Final project due date: May 25 at noon (submit on Canvas)**